Color Country BLM Achieves "Bang for Buck" as War on Cheat Grass Continues

Wildfire is a hot topic for communities of southern Utah these days, and for good reason. Personal safety, property, watersheds, cultural and recreation values, and critical wildlife habitat are just some of the values that are threatened every season due to increasing wildfire activity. The rate of spread and often fire intensity are increased from historic fires, intensified by the invasive "cheat grass" Bromus tectorum. However, the primary question for many people is what steps are land managers taking to mitigate fire behavior and combat the spread of invasive species? The answers become more important when the continual expansion and growth of communities into scenic landscapes that border state and federal lands is added to the equation.

Proactive fuels management efforts have been increased following the Milford Flat Fire which burned over 360,000 acres. This, the largest wildfire in Utah's history, resulted in the loss of two human lives during the fire, and another fatal vehicle accident, from dust storms along Interstate 15. Land managers have been committed to stabilizing the damaged landscape since the fire began on July 7, 2007 by working together to create a fire resistant buffer around communities at risk from wildfire. **(Photo #1)**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has a new partner in the "war on cheat grass". Through partnership efforts with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF), Utah Division of Forestry Fire and State Lands (FFSL), and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), they are all working to reduce fire return intervals within the Color Country District: Beaver, Iron, Washington, Kane, and Garfield Counties to break repetitive burn/reburn fire regimes.

Paul Briggs, Color Country District BLM Fuels Program Manager leading the five county ground treatments said that in order to out-compete cheat grass, agencies are using fire resistant seed mixes in strategic locations. This practice, often referred to as "greenstripping" and is just one method of treatment being used in the Color Country. Following the 2007 fire season, the "Invasive Species Mitigation Fund" was created by the Utah Legislature in the 2008 session. The purpose of the funding initiative is to combat catastrophic wildfire and limit the spread of invasive species." He added, "Senate bill 89 was sponsored by Senator Dennis Stowell and was funded with $2 million in state funds through the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food to help get the job done." Color Country District BLM has combined $1.1 million of the grant funding with BLM hazardous fuels funds and other partner dollars to accomplish a total of three projects, collectively treating 23,500 acres of federal, state, and private lands. **(Photo #2)**

Through extraordinary partnership efforts and effective treatment application, land managers plan to accomplish: 1) reduce and mitigate the loss of human life and property within the wildland urban interface communities that border public lands; 2) reduce future fire suppression and emergency stabilization/rehabilitation costs; and 3) maintain and enhance plant diversity on sagebrush-steppe and other important habitats before and following wildfires. **(Photo #3)**

Proactive interagency cooperation through the Color Country Interagency Fuels Committee and the Southern Region Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative has proven to be the key in accomplishing landscape scale fuels reduction, habitat and watershed enhancement, community fire planning, defensible space education, and public outreach efforts throughout southwest Utah. The Color Country District currently has 109 communities at risk from wildfire within its management area. And 42 of those communities have completed specific fire plans and are planning and/or implementing fuels reduction projects with land management agencies district wide.

(Photo #1) The lightning caused Milford Flat Fire Burned in excess of 357,000 acres of land in central and southern Utah. Invasive cheat grass was a contributing factor to the rapid rate of spread, promoting the largest wildfire in Utah's history.

(Photo #2) Aerial seeding of Milford Flat greenstripping is complete followed by chaining operations to ensure fire resistant seed is planted into the ground before winter precipitation occurs. This fire resistant seed is designed to out-compete cheat grass .

(Photo #3) Looking east toward the Mineral Mountains, in an area near the origin of the Milford Flat Fire, a wide swath of fire resistant vegetation creates the desired “greenstripping” effect along main roads, providing firefighters greater opportunity to control future wildfires. This treatment was conducted in the late fall of 2008 and has proven to be a very successful investment.